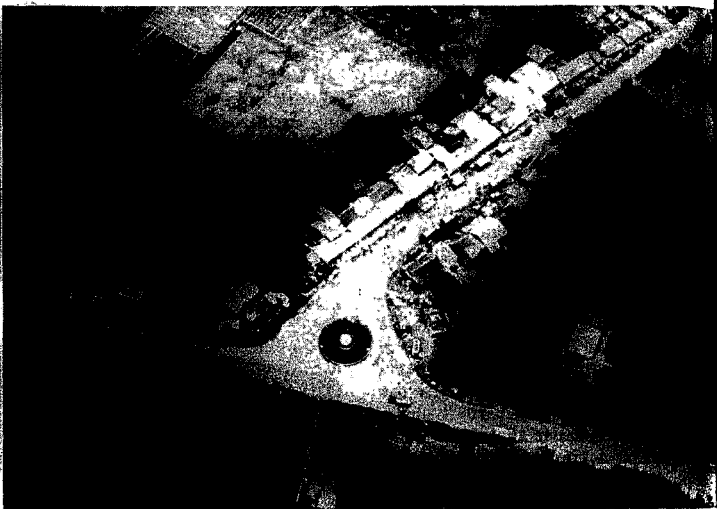


TRUNG LUONG--



SETPIECE VIETNAM

Major Homer L. Stapleton, *United States Army*

THE Regional Force (RF) and the Popular Force (PF) are the unsung heroes of the dirty little war among the hamlets and villages of South Vietnam. Night after night these lightly armed, sketchily trained troops defend their homes against the Viet Cong (VC). Their kills and killed are greater than the regular army of Vietnam. Their pay and benefits are considerably less. The fight at Trung Luong, a district town located on National Route Number 4 in Chau Thanh District, Dinh Tuong Province, deep in delta country, is typical of the brief, violent action that the RF and the PF

are continuously called upon to fight.

At 0237 on 11 August 1966, a VC force consisting of a company of the 514th Regular Battalion, a local "elite" force company known as 207C, and an unknown number of local guerrillas attacked the Chau Thanh District Headquarters compound, the town of Trung Luong, and adjacent government facilities.

At the time of the attack, friendly forces and facilities were located as shown on the map. In direct opposition to the VC attackers were the 172d Company Regional Force billeted 150 meters southwest of the district head-

quarters; a platoon of PF security guards, a platoon of Police Field Forces, and a platoon of two PF armored cars located at the district headquarters; the subsector intelligence platoon, quartered in Trung Luong; a team of Revolutionary Development Cadre which was deployed in the New Life Hamlet stretching northward along the highway between Trung Luong and Long An Bridge; and the Chau Thanh Subsector Advisory Team located within the district headquarters compound. The average RF company has approximately 50 to 65 men and the average PF platoon usually numbers about 15.

Area of Development

The area in which the attack took place is typical of the reasonably secure delta region. National Highway 4 creates a first-class route by which to move produce and goods. Local markets and small businesses have sprung up along the highway leading north from the provincial capital of Mytho to the intersection with Highway 4 at Trung Luong. Homes and temporary dwellings crowd the shoulders of the road and fill the available land around the district headquarters.

VC influence in the district is spotty. Taxation and conscription have become increasingly difficult and dan-

gerous for the local Viet Cong. The district chief is a dedicated professional soldier and talented administrator whose staff is competent and resourceful. Many physical indications of government control such as bridges, watchtowers, improved roadways, schools, refugee shelters, wells, and aid stations have been constructed in the area.

It is not surprising that the Viet Cong took the risk of moving a large force into such an area which was crisscrossed by rivers, canals, and a fairly comprehensive roadnet. This was probably based on the assumed existence of a false sense of security on the part of the populace and its government defenders and the possible reluctance of the government to retaliate massively and destructively in a prized zone of development. Also, if the attack achieved any degree of success, this area could provide lucrative propaganda.

Real and Practice Alerts

Several alerts, both real and practice, had been called by the district chief based on intelligence pertaining to VC forces in the subsector and vicinity. The possibility of an attack in the vicinity of Trung Luong had never been ruled out as the Viet Cong might have hoped. Disposition of the troops, armored cars, mortars, and machineguns within the district compound had been designated and rehearsed.

Communications between the subsector headquarters and the surrounding PF posts were excellent. However, during the hours before the attack, there was no intelligence to indicate the buildup of VC forces in the subsector. A rumor of such an attack was passed along national police channels, but this seemingly unreliable report

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THE TRUNG LUONG ATTACK



ROUTE OF APPROACH



ROUTE OF WITHDRAWAL

(A)

DISTRICT HEADQUARTERS

(B)

PROVINCE HEADQUARTERS

(C)

7TH DIVISION

(D)

ADVISORY TEAM

■ 1-21

POPULAR FORCE POSTS AND
WATCHTOWERS

was downgraded at the province level and was not disseminated to other government agencies in the area. The subsector commander and the subsector advisory team remained completely ignorant of the impending attack.

Simultaneous Attacks

The attack developed in two areas simultaneously. A heavy containing action was launched against the district compound utilizing mortars, a recoilless rifle, and automatic weapons. At the same time, a VC assault company charged the PF post at Trung Luong, 250 meters to the east. All wire communication between the district compound and Trung Luong was cut. The intensity of the assault there was not immediately discernible except by the volume of fire heard above the general din at the district compound.

Dug in along a tree line approximately 500 meters directly south and almost on line with the south wall of the compound, the Viet Cong had emplaced one 57-millimeter recoilless rifle, at least three automatic weapons, and one company of riflemen. This force was later identified as a company of the 514th Regular Viet Cong Battalion.

On the west flank of the compound, enemy fire was desultory and was believed to be composed of local force guerrillas. Between the compound and the Trung Luong post to the east the Viet Cong employed a number of skirmishers armed with light automatic weapons. At least two 60-millimeter mortars were firing on the compound from a position approximately 1,500 meters to the northwest in the vicinity of a small canal which afforded a rapid avenue of withdrawal. Skirmishers were employed among the

houses and buildings directly across the highway from the north wall of the compound.

Earlier in the year, housing for the RF company stationed at the district headquarters was constructed at the extreme southwest corner of the compound, directly in the path of the most likely axis of attack. Once the housing was completed, a mud defensive wall was constructed to protect it. Two sides of this wall, the south and west, had been completed the week previous to the attack. This construction divided the over-all compound into a roughly quartered square, the northeast and southwest quarters occupied and defended and the northwest and southeast quarters water filled, mined, and serving as obstacles. The defensive perimeter area assigned to the RF company, therefore, was greatly reduced and its firepower concentrated.

Inner Compound

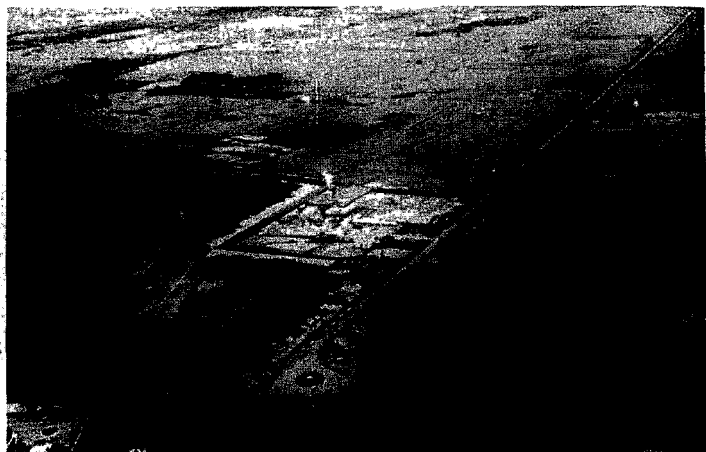
The inner compound, located in the northeast corner of the headquarters area, contained the district headquarters buildings and the billets for the PF security force, armored car platoon, and the subsector advisory team. Tents had been erected in this area for the newly arrived Police Field Forces Company assigned to the district. Only one platoon of this company was at its home station on 11 August. The headquarters compound was covered by heavily sandbagged bunkers.

An 81-millimeter mortar pit and an emplacement containing a 60-millimeter mortar had been constructed during recent months. A 50-caliber machinegun had been fitted with a cast-off armor-plated shield and mounted on a 10-foot-high stone and concrete tower only two weeks before the at-

tack. This weapon, so mounted on the south wall, enjoyed fields of fire to the east, south, and southwest, and could be employed to back up fires along a portion of the north wall, including the main gate.

The ancient *Concord* armored cars were habitually parked so as to be rapidly maneuvered to offset a heavy

area was thoroughly pounded by indirect fire. However, many rounds detonated in the unoccupied northwest and southeast quarters. The recoilless rifle commenced to work over the south wall. Most of the recoilless fire struck the wall and the base of the wall or fell short of the headquarters compound into the southeast quarter. Au-



Trung Luong and the district compound and road junction against which the Viet Cong launched simultaneous attacks

thrust against a particular area of the defenses. The front, or north wall, was the primary area to receive the benefit of this maneuverable firepower. Each vehicle mounted two 30-caliber light machineguns. Personnel were required to sleep in the vehicles to insure rapid deployment.

The attack was signaled by the detonation of a large demolition charge east of the district compound in the direction of Trung Luong. Immediately, mortar rounds began to walk diagonally across the compound from northeast to southwest. The general

tomatic weapons fire laced the south wall, and at least one gun concentrated its fire on the headquarters building, striking in the vicinity of the district chief's quarters.

Accurate sniper fire was directed to the district chief's windows from a tall stand of hardwood trees south of the compound. Small arms fire in volume passed through the compound from the south, but was too high to be effective.

Reaction within the compound was swift and well directed. Within minutes the PF security force had manned

its positions in the mortar emplacements and along the walls. The PF mortar crews directed their fire at the dug-in Viet Cong south of the compound. The 60-millimeter crew was displaced to a firing position that allowed it to execute counterbattery fire into the wood line to the northwest. The two armored cars were moved to the north wall with great speed, the crews mounting them as they moved across the open parade area in the center of the compound.

Machinegun fire from the four mounted 30-caliber guns was directed into the buildings and possible hiding places for the Viet Cong directly across the highway from the main gate in the north wall. PF soldiers mounted the new gun tower and poured out 50-caliber bursts at the enemy located in the paddies to the south.

US Support

The US Advisory Team had vacated its billets and had alerted the sector operations and intelligence center of the attack. Unable to determine the object of the attack or its intensity at first, a flare ship, armed helicopters, and any other available US support were requested by the advisors. Expediting of instructions for artillery support was requested. Communication was excellent along the advisory channels. The advisors had been furnished a bunker for communications in the event of attack, and the team maintained a radio therein at all times.

At Trung Luong, the post and watchtower at the intersection of National Route Number 4 and the main road into Mytho housed the members of the Chau Thanh Subsector Intelligence Platoon and their families. This platoon had gained a repu-

tation for aggressive and fearless night patrols, raids, and ambushes throughout the subsector. They had accounted for many Viet Cong and the majority of the valuable intelligence that had been gathered within the district. A few weeks before, they had surrounded and wiped out a local village VC assassination squad to a man.

Protective Wall

The post was surrounded by a shoulder-high mud wall topped by a four-strand barbed wire fence. The tower and adjacent masonry buildings housed the subsector intelligence officer and some of the RF and PF soldiers. Temporary thatch huts huddled against the permanent buildings and housed most of the married men in the unit. The PF post was flanked closely on the west and east sides by small office-type facilities of the Army Republic of Vietnam national and military police. A sandbagged sentry post faced out onto the intersection.

Businesses and dwellings crowded the walls of the post on the west and south sides. This southwest corner was protected by the wall and a moat-like canal. There were 16 men and several dependents occupying the post at the time of the attack.

The VC demolitions squad signaled the attack by detonating a 10-kilogram mine at the southwest corner of the Trung Luong post. A 10-foot-wide hole was ripped in the defensive wall close behind the dependent quarters. One PF soldier was on duty at ground level and commenced to fire on the Viet Cong charging into the mined gap in the wall. Two PF sentries, armed with US M14 rifles, were on duty in the tower. Another sentry was in the small bunker-type guard post at the main gate.

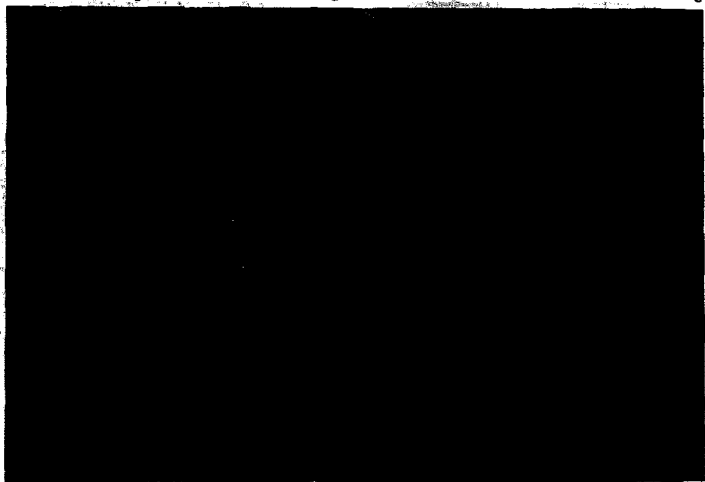
The post was immediately fired upon from all directions. Viet Cong hidden in drainage canals across the highway poured in a devastating fire. The sentry at the front gate and the national policeman on duty were killed outright. The soldier firing into the main assault force coming through the back wall was first wounded and then killed.

Sleeping soldiers awoke to face the automatic weapons of the Viet Cong

post and were driven out. The post was held.

The flare ship requested by the sub-sector team arrived in record time having been airborne at the time it was called into the engagement. Controlled by members of the team, the aircraft dropped flares throughout the later fire fights.

Realizing that the object of the VC attack had been to reduce the Trung



All photos courtesy of author

Weapons and mines captured from the Viet Cong

who had swept into the billets area. Realizing the post had been penetrated, and unable to distinguish friend from foe in the pitch dark below them, the two men in the tower, having exhausted their ammunition, began to toss grenades into the walled-in area and around the foot of the tower.

The Viet Cong failed to hold their objectives. They failed to detonate the mines they had brought to level the

Luong post while holding the forces at the district headquarters at bay, the district chief and his advisor requested flare ships to strafe the possible VC escape routes to the west and southwest of the compound.

Two RF and eight PF soldiers died in the post at Trung Luong. One national policeman was killed, two women and a baby lay dead among the soldiers, and four RF and PF personnel were wounded along with two

national police. One man remained unharmed, and one soldier was captured and taken away by the Viet Cong. At the district headquarters, one RF soldier was killed and eight wounded, one dependent wife was killed, two wounded, and two children were hit by mortar fragments.

VC Casualties

The Viet Cong left eight bodies lying in the early morning sun at the crowded intersection. There were 21 fresh graves located northwest of the district compound, and 13 graves were found in the wood line to the south. Intelligence sources reported that 58 VC wounded were evacuated from the area in sampans. The number of dead was estimated at around 50 and was borne out by the graves discovered the following day and the numerous blood trails leading out of the area.

Friendly forces captured 10 weapons including Soviet rifles, US submachineguns, M1 rifles, and an M79 grenade launcher. Four 10-kilogram mines, 20 grenades, and 10 rounds of 57-millimeter recoilless ammunition were captured. Abandoning this valuable heavy caliber ammunition bears witness to the intensity of fire brought to bear on the VC containing force by the PF troops within the district headquarters compound.

The intelligence picture gathered in the wake of the engagement indicates that the VC approach and withdrawal routes were well reconnoitered, and that guides provided by local force units followed paths and trails well conceived to avoid detection or observation by other than the local populace. National Highway 4 was crossed twice as the Viet Cong moved in, but this presented no security problem since a traffic curfew denies the use of the road between 2200 and 0600.

It is believed that the VC force marched into the objective area from the neighboring subsector where the parent battalion was pinpointed on the previous day. Whether they spent the daylight hours prior to the attack in the paddies and fields northwest of the objective has not been established, but it is likely because the population in that area was sparse and VC oriented.

The absence of any warning from the local populace is not surprising and does not imply complacency or pro-Communist leanings. The insecure plight of the Vietnamese citizen who dwells within the shadow of a province capital is typified by the Trung Luong action. However, the farmer who lives and works outside the direct physical protection of the various government security forces is vastly more unfortunate.

Reaction Forces

Approximately five hours after the attack began, reaction forces moved out into the northwest and western portions of the district in pursuit of the Viet Cong. But the attackers of Trung Luong were safely lost in the impenetrable safety of the Plain of Reeds by daylight.

The regular Vietnamese military units concerned with the engagement were astute and generous in their tribute to the defenders. Not long after the attack, the commanding general of the 7th Infantry Division, Army Republic of Vietnam, accompanied by the province chief, visited the district headquarters where they bestowed 11 Gallantry Crosses upon key officers and noncommissioned officers involved in the fight. Among these was the young subsector executive officer whose calm and accurate control of communications and colla-

tion of incoming information had been so valuable to the district chief in his defense of the area.

The commander of the RF company whose fusilade of small arms may have discouraged a direct attack on the district headquarters was decorated. Among the RF and PF personnel receiving awards were the non-commissioned officers commanding the two mortar crews, the armored cars, and the security platoon. Five privates were decorated for individual feats of heroism.

During the morning following the attack, the detailed plans for the repair of damage and strengthening of the Trung Luong post and district headquarters compound were formulated and the materials committed. The RF and PF dead were quickly, but not unceremoniously, removed in flag-draped coffins from the view of the general public. The VC corpses were displayed along with the captured equipment near the intersection where they were shot down. The intelligence now began to fill in the blank spaces concerning the movements and identities of the VC units involved.

Within four days, the billets had been reconstructed of brick and tin roofing. Bunkers had been erected for the RF and PF contingents and the national police. The walls had been reinforced and more wire had been strung. Concurrently, the walls, billets,

and family quarters at the district headquarters had been completely repaired.

The commander of the RF and PF throughout South Vietnam, accompanied by the senior advisor RF and PF, and a group of high-ranking staff officers visited the assembled survivors and widows of Trung Luong post a few days later. Promotions, awards, and gifts were distributed to deserving personnel and dependents.

The lessons learned at Trung Luong are simple. Constant attention to security and swift, practiced defensive reaction is a necessity wherever the Revolutionary Development Program thrives in Vietnam. Warning of VC assault, no matter how large the force, is unlikely because they will not push home if their mission is compromised. Principal reaction forces must be applied to the VC escape routes as opposed to the area attacked because VC withdrawal itineraries are based on the soonest possible arrival time of the closest such force.

The Vietnamese speak with admiration of the courage and resourcefulness exhibited by Trung Luong's Regional and Popular Force soldiers. The VC propagandists have told the people of the region that they will return in force to Trung Luong. The people there, soldier and citizen alike, are preparing and will be ready for another Setpiece, Vietnam.